

Pentecost 16, Year A, Proper 22
100211
All Saints Episcopal Church

"Now when the owner of the vineyards comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

In the name of the One who creates, who saves and who makes us holy. Amen.

"Here's another story," Jesus says.

There are lots of stories that Jesus tells during the course of his ministry. Many of them begin with, "The kingdom of God is like..." but this one does not. Putting this story in context, we need to know that at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus has just ridden into Jerusalem, surrounded by a crowd putting their coats on the ground for him to ride on. Others are chanting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Others are not so happy to have him there. The whole city is in turmoil.

The first thing Jesus does after his arrival is to go into the Temple, throw out everyone who has set up shop, buying and selling, and kick over the tables of the loan sharks. "This is supposed to be a house of prayer," he says. "You have made it a hangout for thieves!" And he leaves town to spend the night in nearby Bethany.

The next day, Jesus is on his way back to Jerusalem. He is hungry. He spots a fig tree on the side of the road, and thinks he's found a good breakfast. But when he gets to the tree, there is no fruit on it, just leaves. So he zaps it! A very un-Jesus-like response! The tree withers on the spot and becomes a useless dry stick. Jesus says, "No more figs from this tree - ever!"

We might say that Jesus is feeling the tension of the week to come. Time is not on his side and he has to be as blunt as possible if he is going to get the message across.

So here's the story: the wealthy farmer has hired farmhands to tend to his vineyards. When it's time to harvest the grapes, he sends servants to collect his profits from the farmhands. The farmhands beat up and kill the servants. The farmer sends some more, and the same thing happens. At the end of his rope, he sends his son, thinking, "surely they will respect my son." But when he arrives, the

farmhands rub their hands with greed. "Let's kill him, too. Then we'll have it all for ourselves." So that's what they did.

Then Jesus says to his listeners, so what do you think will happen when the farmer gets here? And they answered, "He'll kill them - a rotten bunch, and good riddance. Then he'll get some farmhands who will do the right thing and give him the profits."

Jesus says to them, "Don't you read your Bibles? Haven't you read there *that 'the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone?* This is what will happen: God's kingdom will be taken back from you and handed over to a people who will live out a kingdom life - that is, who will produce the fruits of the kingdom.

Fruits of the kingdom. Those fruits are mercy, justice, compassion, dignity and well-being for all.

Now you've heard those words before. We preach them all the time, because that is what Jesus preached. They are the Good News of the Gospel. And I'm not skipping over them today. But there is another part of today's story that I want to focus on. It's the response the crowd gave Jesus when he asked what they thought would happen to the farmhands when the owner showed up. "He will put those wretches to a miserable death."

It strikes me that in addition to the 'usual' fruits about which Jesus speaks so often, another one of the fruits of kingdom life is freedom from violence, the promise of safety and peace for all. It is shalom. When Jesus says to the chief priests and Pharisees that God's kingdom will be taken back from them and given to people who will live the kingdom life, he is talking about living peacefully just as much as he is talking about living with justice and compassion. I don't think those things can be separated.

In today's story, answering the violence of the farmhands with more violence (a miserable death for a rotten bunch) does no good at all. In fact, if they are killed, the farmhands win. Sure, they are dead, but they have gotten the farmer to play their game and nothing has been accomplished.

And nothing has changed much over time, either, except the scale of the violence. There have been very few years in recorded history in which there have not been any wars somewhere on the planet. In recent times, the War to End all Wars did

not live up to its billing. Wars, genocide, fighting between tribes, ethnic groups, and neighbors, 'domestic disputes' - senseless, all of it - passed down from one generation to the next. Children learning from their parents, growing up to pass it on to their children.

What is even more alarming, I think, is how people use violence in their conversations, how they approve of the use of violence by other people, how they encourage violence. Think, for instance, of the recent crowd reaction to a presidential candidates' declaration of how many prisoners have been executed under his leadership. They applauded and cheered with great enthusiasm. It was like the cheering crowds at a bullfight, or a "professional" wrestling match, at cock fights or dog fights...all cheering for blood, injury, and even death.

Saturday morning I was looking at FaceBook and saw a post by my nephew, who, when he was little, was such a sweet, loving and gentle soul - now an adult, back from fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He wrote: "Whoever decided to steal my Auburn hitch cover (probably the same little [so-and-so's] who steal change out of unlocked cars), I hope you die in a fire. That is all."

I was stunned.

Then I read the comments.

One said, "A fire? Oh come on, you can be more creative than that. I'll start you off: "I hope buzzards nip at your sunburnt body while you pray for death but death won't come."

And my nephew replied, "I always appreciate your creativity however I'm sticking with a fire. Thieves should burn."

Was he kidding? Over a hunk of metal? It made me sick at my stomach.

Later that morning, at a soccer game full of precious little 5 and 6 year-olds who barely knew which end their goals were on, I was stunned again, this time by parents and grandparents who were so caught up in winning that they were screaming directions at their children as if the kids were not kicking, or not running, or not doing whatever the parents thought they should be doing, on purpose. As if they knew all the ins and outs of the game but just didn't want to do

the right things. The adults were angry with them! I'm talking clenched teeth and stomping feet and mean voices! For what purpose? Because winning an elementary school soccer game is more important than anything else? Do they not realize that what my mother told me all my life - "It's not what you say, but how you say it" - really is true?

Is this the kingdom way of life? Can we stop this culture of violence? Will we ever realize the dream of a life of shalom?

It will not be easy. But we cannot continue the way things are. And we cannot NOT do something about it. So while we are treating people with respect and dignity, working for justice with compassion, let's remember that those things are not possible if violence is in the midst of us. The fruits of kingdom life are a package deal: justice, kindness, mercy, compassion, enough to eat, a place to sleep, respect, dignity, freedom from fear, safety. Shalom.

How does it happen? This is the time to ask what would Jesus do. Answer violence with love, not revenge. Love our enemies. Love our neighbors. Love ourselves. Turn the other cheek. Encourage others in the way of peace. And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. AMEN.